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FROM PERSECUTIONS TO DOMINATION: SHAPING THE IDENTITIES OF EARLY CHRISTIANS. AN ARCHEOLOGICAL-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN THE NORTHERN ILLYRICUM

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Abstract:

Archaeological testimonies of Early Christianity in the area of Northern Illyricum come from a relatively late period in regard to the edge of the Mediterranean basin, in which Christianisation had already begun during the time of the apostles. With their edicts, issued in the first decades of the 4th century, two emperors, Galerius and Constantine I, who originated from these areas, set the foundation for free institutional shaping of the Christian community, which they recognised as a growing force in the Late Antique society. Manners in which the Christian community was shaped and reacted to the complex social-economic conditions during this forming period, can be seen from archaeological traces registered, most prominently, in larger urban centres of Northern Illyricum. The decline of the imperial and administrative power of the state, especially during the 5th and the 6th century, which led to a loss of territories and concessions under the pressure to allow barbarian tribes to

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settle on Roman soil, with the inclusion of barbarians in the top of the chain of command of the Roman army, led to a loss of control in managing complex relations, in which the Christian Church appeared as a mediator and a factor which brought together all members of the Roman society. This Church–state alliance enabled stability of sensitive zones of the Empire, and the intense policy of Christianisation and taking over certain administrative-governing jurisdictions only increased the power of the Church in Late Antiquity and led to its domination in the Roman society.

Key words: Northern Illyricum, Christianisation, martyrs, edicts, episcopacies, church buildings, barbarians, 4th–6th/7th century.

MYTS ON THE BEGINNINGS

The Hollywood narrative on Christians hiding in catacombs is the fruit of an artistic expression which was based on scientific interpretations that were known and valid at that moment, and which dominated until the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, according to which catacombs were being built ever since the time of the apostles, when numerous people who were persecuted for Christ's faith found refuge in them. These interpretations were founded on a tradition, tendentiously constructed during the Catholic response to the reformation processes started by Martin Luther in the beginning of the 16th century. Early Christian monuments in Rome – basilicas, mausoleums, catacombs, were chronologically determined into the time of the apostles, in order to prove that *Urbs* played the most important role in the spreading of the new faith ever since the very beginning of Christianity, thus stressing the dominance of the Catholic church and its continuity from the very inception of Christianity (Whatagin Cantino 1980, 4–14; Fiocchi Nicolai 1998, 11; Snyder 2003, 5–9).

Narratives on the beginnings of spreading Christianity are still very unclear and full of erroneous, often constructed conclusions, due to the scarcity and lack of reliability of testimonies from the first centuries in which this religion was being shaped. In the beginning, Christianity was just one of the numerous monotheistic religions, originating from the territory of *Asia Minor*, under the influence of religious doctrines from that area, but which in time, thanks to a wide-spread network of activists and followers, appeal of ideas and beliefs it spread in all ranks of the Roman society and firm inner structure, grew and became the dominant religion of the Mediterranean basin (Snyder2003, 15–21; Klutz 2002, 166–171).

INSTITUTIONALISED BEGINNIGS: PERSECUTORS AND MARTYRS. GALERIUS – AN UNYIELDING PAGAN

The first data on Christians and their communities which we have available for the territory of today's Serbia – in Roman times, the province of *Moesia Superior* and parts of *Pannonia Inferior* – originate only from the Late Antiquity period (Zeiller 1967, 141, 148–164; Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 198–201),[2] when practicing the Christian faith was permitted by laws, first by the edict of Emperor Galerius, issued in the end of April 311 in Sofia – *Serdica*, and later by that of Constantine I and Licinius, proclaimed in 313 (the so-called Edict of Milan). These documents, which put Christianity in the same rank with other religions and allowed it to be practiced freely, represent exacted and political decisions by people who proclaimed them, so that the growing power of the Christian community and Church be placed under a certain level of control by the imperial and administrative powers.

2 In Late Antiquity, with reforms of the administrative-governing system under Diocletian and Constantine I, these areas were part of the prefecture *Illyricum* (*Praefectura praetorio pro Illyrici*). In scientific papers, the term most commonly used for these territories is Northern *Illyricum*.

Although often overlooked, the edict of Emperor Galerius represented a significant foundation for an institutional establishing and rise of Christian communities, although the hypocrisy of the state system could be seen in practice through further and deeper persecutions of Christian believers (DePalma Digeser 2014, 18, 22–27). Historical sources note that Galerius issued this edict on his deathbed, and a contemporary from his age, Christian-oriented Lactantius, saw in Galerius' illness and his body decaying due to severe gangrene, which affected his entire body, a sign of Divine punishment for Emperor's crimes against the Christians. Lactantius wrote about the Emperor's cruel nature and low origins in his work *De mortibus persecutorum* (*On the Deaths of the Persecutors*) (Lactantius, XXXIII.7, XXXV.4–5), where we can find, with some certainty, the narrative of Galerius' *odium* towards the Christians, which were routed in his family circle.

Galerius (Fig. 1), a person of low, Dacian origin, began to climb the hierarchy because of his military skills, which helped him rise to the throne during the Tetrarchy period, first as *Caesar* (293–305), and then as *Augustus* (305–311) (Stein 1968, 65–93). His rise in the military carrier occurred during the sensitive periods of ruthless power struggles in the state, economically and socially weakened, in which the law of the strong would clear the path towards imperial purple. The tetrarchic principle of power, through divinisation of the rulers, had many elements borrowed from eastern despots, especially in terms of complicated ceremonies and humiliating attitude towards the subjects. The elements of complicated processions of paying homage to the emperor were brought to life in the passage scheme through the imperial palace itself in the fortified complex of Gamzigrad – *Romuliana* (Jeremić 2020b, 354–359). Emperor Galerius built the fortified palatial complex based on the model of the building raised by this co-ruler Diocletian in Split, with the difference that in the architecture of Diocletian's foundation the military character of the complex was still dominant, while in Galerius' case – all was subordinated to the cult of the ruler, his hedonism and comfort. The palace and the entire settlement, as can be seen from the name of

Fig. 1. Gamzigrad – *Romuliana*, portrait of Galerius (photo Nebojša Borić, documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

the place, Galerius dedicated to his mother Romula, a woman of Dacian origin, from across the Danube.[3]

The building complex in *Romuliana* represents a combination of defensive architecture – fortification with very powerful ramparts and twenty densely distributed massive towers (Fig. 2), which show the military character and taste of the person who commissioned it, but also of luxury, represented by buildings within (Popović 2019, 65–94). The largest part of the complex is dedicated to a luxurious habitation and official block of buildings in the northern half of the fortification, where we can obtain the best overview, through the symbolic-artistic decorative program and through the passage scheme, of its opulence and tendency towards sacralisation of the space (Fig. 3). Artistic works (various mosaics with figural and geometric representations, polychrome painted walls, sculptures, architectural decorations)

3 Due to the exceptional finding of the archivolt with the inscription FELIX ROMVLIANA, in the ruins of an, at that moment, still insufficiently researched luxurious building, the so-called "Romula's triclinium", it was possible to identify this fortified complex as Galerius' residence with certainty, which he built with the intention of spending his life there after leaving the throne. Srejović 1985, 51–67.

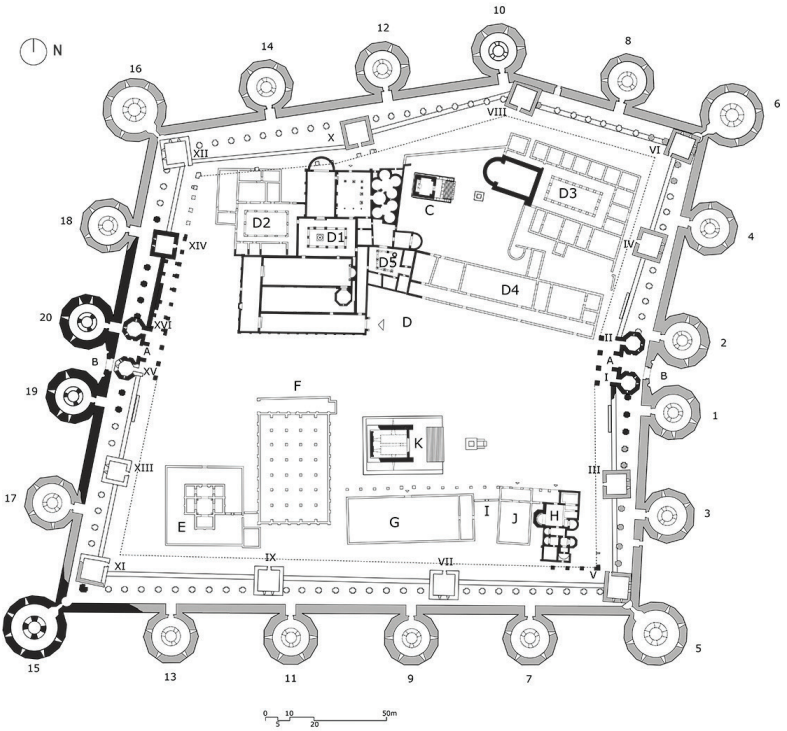

Fig. 2. Gamzigrad – *Romuliana*, site plan of the fortified palace (after Popović 2019, fig. 2)

were made mostly in the final phase of Galerius' reign (308–311), after the work on the palace in Thessaloniki had been finished, hence, the Emperor could have enjoyed its opulence only during a very short period of time or not at all (Jeremić 2020b, 369). In terms of the program, all was subordinated to the adoration of the Emperor, and if the Emperor himself wasn't in *Romuliana*, his monumental statue, made of precious Egyptian porphyry, hard and unsuitable for moulding, stood in place of the living Emperor, making him present in the *aula*, where the visitors would pay homage before it and communicate with it "*in absentio*", as with a deity (Jeremić, 2021, 121–140).[4]

4 This role was probably also fulfilled by another monumental porphyry statue, discovered in the ruins of another tetrarchic luxurious complex, built by Galerius' nephew, Maximinus Daia. Like his uncle, he also had a reputation of being a great persecutor and enemy of the Christians. During archaeological research of the complex in Šarkamen, near Negotin, remains of a statue were found, carefully broken into the smallest pieces possible, which could be interpreted as retribution, possibly of the irate Christian population, which was oppressed by the Emperor, as an act of *damnatio memoriae*. Tomović 2005, 51–56.

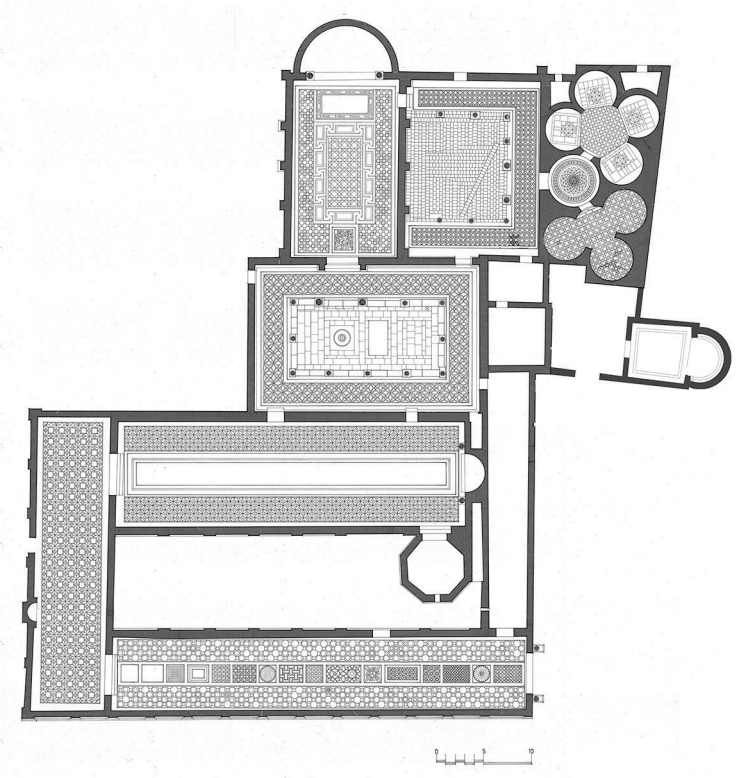

Fig. 3. Gamzigrad – *Romuliana*, mosaic floors in the imperial palace (after Čanak-Medić 1978, fig. 93)

Galerius' decisions in regard to the governing the state – especially in his relationship towards the Christians, were largely influenced by his mother Romula. Historical sources, depicting the Emperor in an unfavourable light, described Romula as a vindictive woman, whose character corresponded to that of her son. She was worshiping cults of mountain deities, linked to her Dacian land of origin. Emperor's mother would often hold opulent feasts celebrating the deities she worshiped, to which she would invite local people as well, however, during fasting and praying periods Christians would refuse to take unsuitable food, which would cause her ire, which, in turn, she transferred onto her son (Lactantius, XI. 1–2).

Hagiographies of numerous martyrs from the times of Diocletian and Galerius speak of the refusal of Christians to pay homage to Roman deities and

take part in pagan cults, because of which they were subjected to the worst possible torture and death. Persecutions were especially common in large urban centres, and executions were mostly performed in *Sirmium*, where the rulers would reside or occasionally sojourn. Imperial brutalities reached a special culmination in 303–304, when a large number of supporters of the Christian Church died, among which bishops, deacons, their family members, soldiers, craftsmen, and even women couldn't escape Roman retributions (Zeiller 1967, 79–105).

Galerius' foundation *Romuliana*, the place where the Emperor planner to enjoy his old age, free of care, was transformed, after the Emperor's death, from the second half of 4th century until the end of the Antiquity, into a settlement with a distinctly Christian character. Along the southern end of the palace, by damaging the corridor with mosaic floors, two Early Christian basilicas were built (Fig. 4), one above the other, in the 5th and the 6th century; the later one of them had a built quatrefoil-shaped baptistery in its

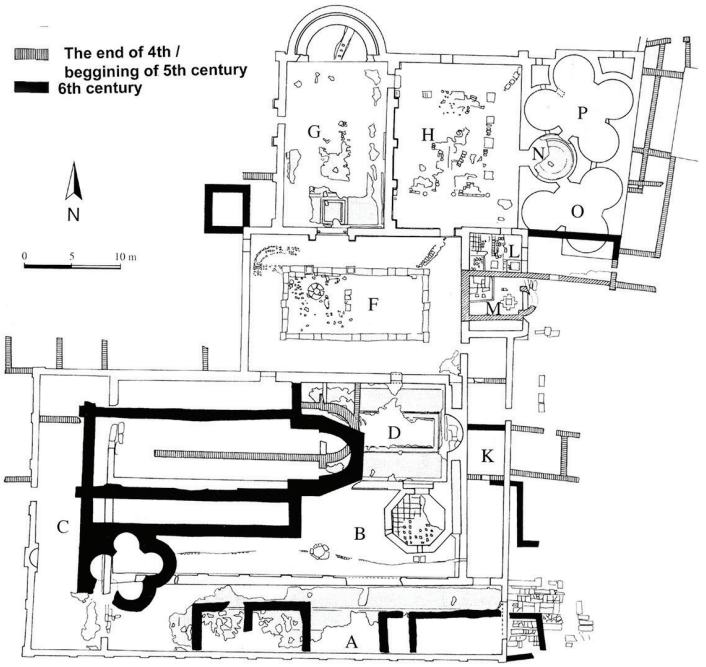

Fig. 4. Gamzigrad – *Romuliana*, Christian sacral buildings in the imperial palace (after Petković 2010, fig. 171)

southern part (Čanak-Medić 1978, 127–139; Čanak-Medić, Stojković-Pavelka 2010, 53, pl. V). The space to the south from Galerius' festive *aula* was also transformed: another chapel (5th century) was adapted there, with a baptistery from the 6th century (Petković 2010, 198, fig. 171). The lack of written sour-ces on the church organisation in *Romuliana* prevents us from having a full overview of this place in a wider Christian context, but we do have sufficient elements which suggest a take-over of control over government, administration and other municipal jurisdictions over the population by the Christian clergy. Additionally, geophysical prospection and minor trench excavations revealed a part of a complex which indicates the existence of an isolated Christian community in *Romuliana* in the Late Antiquity or Early Byzantine period (4th–6th century) (von Bülow *et al*. 2009, 112, Abb. 5; 116, Kat. 26-28) (Fig. 5). It is a space in which three churches, with similar bases, were built, one of them separated by a fence from the remaining part, and which could indicate the existence of a monastic community or liturgical practice of a population that migrated here.

Fig. 5. Gamzigrad – *Romuliana*, Christian sacral buildings *extra muros*, No. 26-28 (after von Bülow et al. 2009, Abb. 5)

CONSTANTINE I AND THE CITY OF HIS BIRTH – STRENGTHENING OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Rare historical sources mention *Naissus*, today's Niš, as the birthplace of Emperor Constantine I (306–337) (Fig. 6), who is considered to be the first Christian emperor. In the beginning of his rule, he was a worshiper of the Sun God – Sol; however, after being converted, on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, because he dreamt of Christ's symbol of victory,

Fig. 6. Niš – *Naissus*, portrait of Constantine I (photo Nebojša Borić, documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

according to Christian historiographers, he became devoted to the Christian faith (Barnes 2016, LV-LXVII). By issuing the Edict of Milan on religious tolerance in 313, he paved the way for the Christians to be able to practice their religion freely and, at the same time, guaranteed the safety of Church possessions and properties, as well as a series of tax reliefs (Corcoran 2000, 155, no. 63). Because of this strategy, as well as the wholehearted help of his mother, Constantine managed to win the Church over to his side and

to secure, through gifts, the sympathy of the Christian leaders. Ever since his period, and especially in the middle and the end of the 4th century, euergetism became prominent, contributing to the well-being and strengthening of the economic power of the Church (Fiocchi Nicolai 2007, 107–108). Euergetism, a concept known from the Roman practice, has many epigraphic testimonies in the territory of Serbia in Roman and Late Roman period.[5]

From sources, we learn about the building activities of Constantine I in *Naissus*, namely, that the Emperor magnificently decorated the place of his birth: "*Constantinus...natus in oppide Naiso atque eductus, quod oppidum postea magnifice ornavit*" (Orig. Const. 2.2).[6] Unfortunately, the archaeological picture of the monomialization and Christianisation of the city is missing, due to the small scale of research (Jeremić 2018, 182–187). Only sporadic traces of the fortified Late Antique city are known – a forum in the central part, a network of streets and buildings with still undefined functions (the so-called building with the octagon, the object under vaults, civilian basilica, a Byzantine building *et al.*).

In the Early Christianity period, *Naissus* was famous as a place where saints performed miracles (Victricius, *De laude sanctorum*, c. XI), i.e. there were relics of martyrs in the city, with healing properties, kept in churches and basilicas, which became the objects of pilgrimage. There were certainly

5 The examples are abundant, hence, we will mention only a few, such as the construction of a fountain for soldiers who served their term in *Singidunum* by a former soldier, in memory of his late wife, 2nd–3rd century; a commander of an encampment helped build a local hospital in Guberevac – *Demessus*; a donor restored the floors of a soldiers' bathroom in Karataš – *Diana*, and a similar case was also noted in *Viminacium*. From the Christian period, one member of the church, *antistes Stefanus*, helped restore the fortified settlement with appertaining objects and the church in the vicinity of Prijepolje in the 7th century. Collective euergetism can probably be best seen in the setting of a polychrome mosaic floor in the luxurious church building, the so-called rotunda, in Guberevac, ca middle of the 4th century. Dušanić 1976, 151–154.

6 It is very important to note the fact that Constantine was born in the *oppidum* in *Naissus*, that is to say, in the fortified city, and that later on he richly decorated this fortress with its appertaining buildings. The area in question is certainly the area of today's fortress of Niš, where the centre of the Late Antique city was, with its administrative-governing buildings.

several church buildings on the territory of the city that were dedicated to different saints, however, we don't have reliable data on their number and locations, except in the case of churches built in the area of the largest city necropolis in today's city suburb of Jagodin Mala (Jeremić 2014, 18–22; Jeremić, Filipović 2016, 1746–1747). The city certainly had a main cathedral church, which hasn't been located yet, where the seat of the bishops of the city was. Sources mention the bishop of *Naissus* Gaudentius *ab Achaia (!) de Naiso* (*CSEL* 65, 66, 1, 9), that in 343 he took part in the church council in *Serdica* and that on Easter 344 he was the host of bishop Athanasius of Alexandria (Ath., *Epist. fest cum chronico*, a. 344; *PG* 26, 1355–1356), with whom he held the holy mass in *Naissus*. Except for Gaudentius, the names of three more bishops are known from the period of the 5th and the 6th century: Martianus *episcopus Nasisitanus* (409–414) (*PL* 20, 519–521, 527), Gaianus *Naissitanus* (Marc. *Chron., ad ann*. 516) and Proiectus, *reverendissimum episcopum Naissitanum* (553) (Zeiller 1967, 158–159).

Indirect archaeological data indicate that the central plateau of the fortress of Niš was the place where the seat of *episcopus Naissitanus* was, where the remains of a building were found (Fig. 7), dated into the 5th–6th century, with only in a part of the atrium and several rooms having been researched; items registered there were determined as liturgical (Ljubinković

Fig. 7. Niš – *Naissus*, 5th–6th century building on the central plateu of the fortiefied city (photo Gordana Jeremić)

1963, 142). The building remains could have belonged to a part of the sacral complex. The sacredness of the space itself was confirmed by later construction works, when a mosque was built here in the Ottoman period.

When it comes to *Naissus*, we should bear in mind the fact that Roman rulers used to sojourn in the city, for longer or shorter periods of time (Vasić 2008, 9–23), with their entourage, often brining along their mobile court workshops (*officinae*) (Popović 1997, 134–138), in which items were made that were given as gifts on occasions of imperial jubilees or as rewards for being loyal to the emperor and the imperial family. It was especially Constantine's heirs that used to spend shorter or longer periods of time in *Naissus*, where it is possible that, aside from their influence on municipal administration, they also influenced church policies as well. During the last several decades of the 4th century, the bishop's throne of *Naissus* was occupied by Bonosus, declared to be a heretic (Zeiller 1967, 159; Bratož 2011, 216). Because to his teachings, which relied on Donatism, and his network of priests, he had a large influence in *Gallia* and *Pannonia*, and traces of his teachings had been noted in the epoch of Justinian as well, when the final clash with this heresy occurred. In 391, a council was organised in Capua against Bonosus, where his teachings were condemned (Zeiller 1967, 344–350). At this time, the throne was occupied by the orthodox Emperor Theodosius I (379–395) and, as can be judged by his movements, he sojourned in *Naissus* on several occasions (AD 379–380, 388, 394) (Vasić 2008, 20). For the time being, we don't have any data on whether Theodosius had met with Bonosus, but some other, indirect data speak of the richest ranks of the population of *Naissus* diverging from the Bonosian doctrine and being close to the tendencies linked to Rome and Roman popes. These traces could be seen in the program scheme of one of the most important painted tombs in *Naissus*, in the city suburb of Jagodin Mala, discovered by accident in 1953, dated into the final decades of the 4th century (Jeremić 2014, 44–46). The walls of the barrel-vaulted tomb, built for the burial of three to four individuals, have representations of the princes of apostles, Saint

Peter and Saint Paul (Fig. 8). Representations of saints, martyrs and figures from the Bible aren't rare in funerary painting, but representations of Saint Peter and Saint Paul in this period also had a propaganda character, with the goal of strengthening the influence of Rome, through the establishment of a vicariate in Thessaloniki (Jeremić 2019, 121). Traces of this activity can also be seen in the wall paintings of tombs in Pécs – *Sopianae*, dated into the same period, as well as the paintings from catacombs of Rome from the middle – second half of the 4th century (time of the pope Damasus and his heirs) (Hudák 2019, 80–82).

Fig. 8. Niš – *Naissus*, tomb discovered in 1953, representation of Saint Peter and Saint Paul (photo Zoran Petrović, documentation of the Institute of Archaeolgy)

However, indirect traces of the official state policy of Theodosius I towards different Christian communities can be found in the settlement near *Naissus*, which was the economic centre of the city for gathering and distributing taxes (*annona*) and an important production point of the wider region, in *Mediana*. During the reign of Constantine and his heirs, this settlement with private properties grew into an economic and production giant, which came to an end in the final decades of the 4th and the first half of the 5th century. It was most probably in the times of Theodosius I that the

central part of *Mediana* went through a transformation of the space through sacralisation (Jeremić, forthcoming), when two minor one-nave churches were raised, one alongside the other, with one of them probably having the function of the episcopacy, with registered benches for priests (*subselium*) (Jeremić, Čerškov 2020, 226–227) (Fig. 9).[7] Remains of the appertaining baptistery still haven't been discovered.[8] Common traits of both churches are their relatively modest dimensions, as well as a very rustic manner of building and adapting existing structures. Considering the fact that they were preserved in their foundation zones, there are no precise data on materials used in their making, but a secondary use of building material for their decoration was noted (modest mosaic panel in the zone of the *ambon* in the southern church, as well as remains of a possible wall mosaic panel in the northern church, with remains of glass tiles, covered with golden foil).

Fig. 9. Brzi Brod – *Mediana*, late 4th century church with subselium and ambo (photo Marija Obradović, documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

7 Dating was performed on the basis of an analysis of the findings of coins from the southern church.

8 The theory of certain authors that the polygonal room with exedra, ca 100 m to the north from the churches, had a baptismal function, has no foundation in archaeological traces. The mentioned polygonal room was a part of the private luxurious summer villa complex, with a profane character. Jeremić 2015, 15–25.

What characterises the epoch in which the two churches were built and in active use, is a specific material culture which surrounds them and which indicates the presence of different groups of Germanic immigrants. Burials of two individuals with artificially deformed skulls were registered in two graves in the vicinity of the church (Mikić 2010, 164–165).[9] It is possible that several different Germanic tribes lived in this place, in a relatively short time span of several decades, and which had some sort of economic and religious autonomy in regard to the near-by *Naissus*. If the first wave of immigrants consisted of Western Goths or their allies, we know that they were converted to Christianity under the influence of the Arian heresy, and that this form of Christianity persisted with them for a very long time. However, artificially deformed skulls of the deceased buried around churches are typical for the tribes of Eastern Germanic origin, same as the finding of a silver fibula (Maksimović 2004, 217, kat. 199), which probably belongs to this cultural milieu.

In a still unknown chronological context, but most probably after the middle of the 5th century, the area of the spacious peristyle of the main administrative-governing building (villa with the peristyle) was used for the construction of a minor object with an apse, oriented along the South–North axis, which could be identified, with certain caution, as a smaller rural chapel.[10] Similar sacralisation of space, with a larger number of churches built, was seen in the example of *Romuliana*, where they were built by adapting the space within the imperial palace (three objects), or building new churches (at least three) outside of the defended space. With their shape, size and distribution, churches – chapels from *Mediana* remind of the *extra muros* objects in *Romuliana* and it would be possible to establish, through comparative archaeological-historiographical methods, the mechanisms

9 Artificially deformed skulls occur in the period of the 5th–6th century in the Germanic–Hun area, under the influence of the customs of Middle and Far East, and they are the symbol of belonging to elite ranks of that population.

10 Unpublished, drawing Miroslav Jeremić, 1973, documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade.

according to which these church complexes were built in the Late Antiquity period, as well as their religious and social dimension within a broader territorial framework.

RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF THE ROMAN LIMES

The Roman limes on the Daco-Moesian soil represents an uninterrupted chain of fortifications and settlements along the Danube, which communicated with settlements and fortifications on the near-by river bank, open to influences of different cultures and identities, and exchange of products. Also, they were largely exposed to common intrusions of barbarians, destructions of the population and buildings, and numerous plunders. Periods of crises, invasions and occupations lead to economic, social and cultural isolation and degradation of given areas. River traffic on the Danube often suffered because of these situations, thus causing difficulties or interruptions in the supply of merchandise and food from different parts of the Empire for cities, settlements and fortresses. The economic situation of the Late Antiquity period, which influenced all the spheres of public and private life, was termed as a period of "minimalism" in scientific papers, precisely because of the clear closure of the Roman economic and social system into a narrow framework and the society focusing on meeting their own needs (Banaji 2015, 7–13). These processes were especially prominent along the Limes, where depopulation would often occur, after which a population with a federate status would be settled, with different cultural, ethnic and economic habits, with the goal of protecting the border from the intrusions of the barbarians, and, at the same time, they would provide for the life of the military and civilian population of the given area through self-sustaining local economy. Essentially, the process of barbarisation of the Roman society occurred in all segments.

In the Late Antiquity period, the life of the autochthonous inhabitants along with the newly arrived populations was linked not only by the joint use of space and resources, but also by the religious dimension. Military and civilian authorities of that period were significantly weakened, which helped the Church to take over the role of the main pillar of the Late Antique society. These processes were especially prominent in the 5th and the 6th – beginning of the 7th century.

Christianity in cities and settlements along the middle-Danubian limes developed at a later hours in regard to the coastal parts of the Mediterranean basin. The presence of the followers of Christ's faith was confirmed by sources in the 2nd century AD, when Christian soldiers were mentioned in the ranks of *Legio XII Fulminata* (Zeiller 1967, 44–45) which took part in wars of Marcus Aurelius against the tribes Quadi, Iazyges and Marcomani in the Danubian valley. However, there are no archaeological testimonies on the Christianisation of the Limes from that period, instead, they are dating from Late Antiquity, especially from the 4th century AD (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 197–200). In larger city centres, such as *Singidunum*, *Vinceia*, *Margum*, *Viminacium*, burials were registered on necropoles that had been performed in built tombs with unequivocally Christian content (wall paintings) or in lead and stone sarcophagi with Christian motifs (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 224–240). Also, artefacts were registered in grave inventories that can be considered to be items of personal piety (rings with representations of crosses, fish, anchors *et al.*) (Ilić, Jeremić 2018, 267–281).

In cities such as *Singidunum*, as early as the end of the 3rd and the first years of the 4th century, there were organised Christian communities, with clergy. However, there are no archaeological data from that period on the appearance of church buildings themselves, which is the consequence of insufficient research level of the territories of Roman settlements along the bank of the Danube. From the acts of councils, data can be reconstructed on the existence of organised episcopacies in *Singidunum*, *Margum*

and *Viminacium*, in cities which also represented the most important economic centres of the province, located at a relatively small mutual distance. Bishops of these cities would actively take part in the religious and liturgical life of the Early Christian world on occasions. An especially active role was played by the Arian bishop of *Singidunum*, Ursacius, a great adversary of the Nicean-oriented Athanasius of Alexandria (Zeiller 1967, 149-150; 216; Lippold 1961, 1055). At the council in *Serdica*, in 343, Ursacius' name found itself on the list of heretics (*nomina haereticorum*) (Mirković 1976, 27). During the many decades he spent on the episcopal throne in *Singidunum*, Ursacius played an important role in the expanding of the Arian faith, well-spread across the Danubian valley and *Illyricum*, he was the host of a local synod of Arian representatives (Bratož 2011, 228, note 112), and, together with episcope Valens from *Mursa*, he had a significant influence on the religious attitude of Emperor Constantius II (337–361) (Barceló 2004, 149).

At this research level, it isn't possible to give more precise answers to the question on how the religious diversity in cities and settlements along the Danubian border influenced the everyday life of the Christian population and the manifestations of their religiousness. We find traces about the religious life of Early Christians in these areas in the mentioned figural representations

Fig. 10. Beograd – *Singidunum*, the Jonah sarcophagus
(photo Nebojša Borić, documentation of the Institute of Archaeology)

from the funerary sphere, where we encounter standard repertoires of Roman provincial art, adapted for new clients: representations of earthly and heavenly paradise, now enriched with Christian symbols, most commonly Christ's monogram or cross (the example of the tombs from *Viminacium*) (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 234–235, with older refernces). Among the most popular Christian motifs are the Good Sheppard or representations from the cycle of the prophet Jonah (Fig. 10), who finds his way to final salvation through temptations, which represents a metaphoric image of the Early Christian world full of dangers that the believers went through on their way towards salvation (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 229–230, fig. 26, 27).

The preservation and strengthening of the Christian religious identity were especially prominent in the period of the restoration of the Danubian limes, in times of construction or restoration of a series of fortifications, in which special importance was given to the building of church edifices, often on a central position within the defended space. The process which began in times of Emperor Anastasius I (491–518) was continued on a larger scale in times of Justinian I (527–565) and it showed, in the urbanistic-structural sense, the importance of building churches, which became place of common gathering of the population of fortified and near-by settlements. From this period at the Danubian border, there are no known Justinianic command buildings made of strong materials; this privilege was given only to church edifices, built from stone, mortar and bricks, while buildings and areas for the lodging of the army were made from lighter materials (wood, daub) or tent constructions (Jeremić 2020a, 340). The domination of the church within the ramparts, with examples registered in Čezava – *Novae*, Gornji Milanovac – *Taliata*, Hajdučka Vodenica, Boljetin – *Smorna* (Fig. 11), Vajuga – Karaula (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 209–219), represent only some of the registered cases of the domination of Christian places of prayer, indicative of the social-cultural dimension of relationships within an inhabited defended space. The analysis of remains of other archaeological traces from within the fortifications from the 6th and the beginning of the 7th century (workshops and areas for

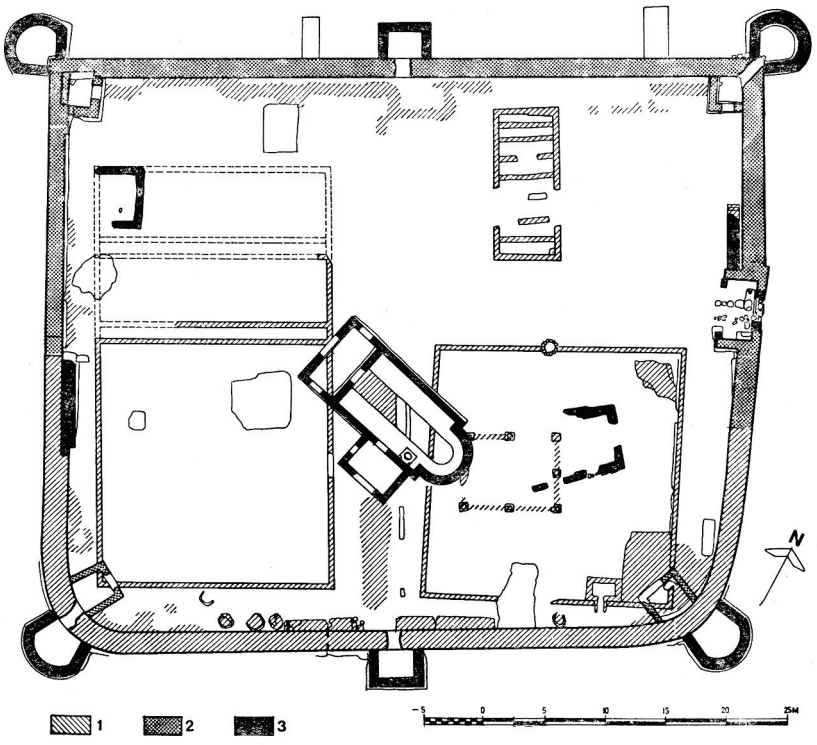

Fig. 11. Boljetin – *Smorna*, site plan with 6th c. church building (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, fig. 14).

producing items made of metal, clay, glass, wood, processed bone and antler) showed a high level of ruralisation of the defended space and erasure of border between the military and the civil character of a fortification (Jeremić 2020a, 340). Within such a structure, the dominance of a church building, often equipped with installations for baptisms or seats for bishops, indicates a common presence of high church dignitaries in the zone of the Limes, and also the obvious growing need for converting the non-Christian population and practicing church rituals with the local population.

The material culture of fortifications from the 5th and the 6th century, in which church buildings have been registered, indicate the cohabitation of members of different ethic cultural groups. Items are often discovered among the findings which can be linked to members of different Germanic

populations. Historical sources confirm the presence of Herules after 512, and Germanic necropoles with elements that indicate Christianised barbarian populations have been noted in larger and more important centres of the section of the Limes in *Moesia Prima*, in *Singidunum*, *Margum*, *Contra Margum* and *Viminacium* (Bugarski, Ivanišević 2018, 296 –306). Members of Germanic tribes had a privileged status in the Romaian society as military elite, and maintaining the balance between these soldiers for hire, regular Romaian army, the local and the newly arrived population was a very delicate task, with the Church being obviously the only one able to perform it, by keeping all of the participants subjugated and in an, at least provisory, peace. Aside from the instability of the Romaian border along the middle-Danubian limes, groups of followers of Fotinus' and Bonosus' heresy that were still active continued to represent a threat to the state and the Church in times of Justinian I, and the Emperor began to wage war against them in 535; a special role in the elimination of these heresies in the Balkans was played by the bishop of *Aquae*, one of the most important episcopacies on this part of the Danubian border (Mirković 1995, 208–212).

BEING A CHRISTIAN IN THE LATE ANTIQUITY PERIOD – INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

Religious diversity was a trait of the Roman society ever since its very beginnings. Monotheism, foreign to the Roman culture, by means of contacts and fluctuations of the population and the army, prevalently from the East, gradually reached a dominant place in the religious life of the Empire. In the Late Antiquity period, especially with the introduction of the Dominate, where the ruler was the supreme master (*dominus*) of the state and the lives of his subjects, a great resistance that members of the Christian community showed against such a system doesn't surprise. It was precisely the introduction of the

Dominate that lead to escalations, in which numerous Christians were executed, however, the growing force of the believers and a strong organisational structure of the Church represented too great a danger to the stability of peace in the state, hence, emperors who originated from these areas, Galerius from *Romuliana* and Constantine from *Naissus*, issued edicts, with which Christianity was first acknowledged, and then the way was open for people to practice this religion freely.

In socially diverse and very dynamic, mobile society, such as the Roman was, religious doctrines would easily reach numerous followers. One of the main carriers of religious ideas was the Roman army, whose mobility of troops and recruiting from all parts of the Empire enabled numerous contacts with different religious communities, and which would then spread onto the population in centres in which they were stationed. During the first three centuries of Christianity, the area of Northern *Illyricum* didn't play a significant role in the spreading of the new faith. A cause for that can be found in several elements, typical for these territories. Firstly, even though it was a very bustling bordering province of the Empire, this area represented a conservative milieu, in which old, autochthonous traditions managed to maintain hold for a long time, masked or assimilated with the Roman religion. These areas are also known for having a relatively small number of cities with a developed urban culture. This was, first and foremost, a militarised zone, in which those religious communities with almost a military hierarchy had the best standing ground, such as, for example, the Mithraic community.

The first more reliable trace of the presence of Christians comes from the period of Tetrarchy in large city centres, such as *Sirmium* and *Singidunum*, where the Christians publicly stood up to the authority of the Roman emperors and Roman state religion, because of which a series of persecutions and executions occurred, which caused an avalanche of displeasure and drew attention to the growing Christian community. By introducing Christianity into legal and jurisdictional courses of the state in the Late Antiquity,

the Christian church, even though it was deeply divided by different dogmatic currents, with its clear management structure and under the patronage of the emperors, who often used the Church to strengthen their own influence, and *vice versa*, it managed to impose itself as one of the main partners of the state in the maintenance of stability in the provinces. This alliance was especially efficient in cases when the state had to turn to introduction of foreign soldiers for hire into the Roman army and to settling different barbarian tribes, especially in the bordering areas, in order to preserve its territories and maintain the economy on a sustainable level. The role of the Church in such circumstances was especially important, reflecting in the conversion of non-Christian population, conducting regular liturgical practices and in maintaining social stability in multi-ethnic environments, since the territories of the Roman Empire were precisely like that in the Late Antiquity period. Aside from religious activities, the Church gradually took over other roles from the civil Roman society, such as, for example, organisation of hospitals and treatments, distribution of medications etc.

Being a Christian in the Tetrarchy period was often dangerous for the true followers of Christ's faith, because of their refusal to pay homage to the absolute rulers and their deities. With the institutional introduction of Christianity, especially in the middle and the end of the 4th century, the Church grew stronger economically and attracted a large number of followers, especially from higher municipal social ranks, who showed their devotion to the Church through gifts and legacies. One of the best examples of collective euergetism – desirable form of behaviour of responsible members of the community, was registered with a luxurious mosaic in the church with a monumental dome (the so-called rotunda) in Guberevac, in the mining centre of Kosmaj. Among the donors there were both women and men, of different origin (Greek, Syrian, Roman – local?) (Dušanić 1974, 93–103).

In a second case from the end of the 4th century, there is the example of two rural churches – chapels, with one of them having a modestly decorated

floor with a mosaic panel, with a depiction of Christ's monogram, in the *ambo* area (Jeremić 2006, 155–156). They are linked to the rural population, living in the once magnificent and rich settlement of the Constantine and post-Constantine period in *Mediana*, which went through a great economic transformation and artistic decline and downfall with the introduction of a new population. The *odium* towards the pagan past can be seen through physical destruction of Roman pagan deities, which adorned the villa with a peristyle (Jovanović 1975, 57, 60–65), and putting them aside in a room with economic character. This Christian community, settled in the immediate vicinity of the metropolis *Naissus*, obviously enjoyed not only territorial, but possibly also religious privileges.

With the gradual decline of the power of the state in the Late Antiquity period, the Christian Church appears as a force which united all social factors and which successively spread its influence and increased its wealth. These tendencies can be seen especially through the construction of a larger number of church buildings, with significant dimensions and different manners of decoration, in important economic and religious centres of that time, such as Caričin Grad – *Iustiniana Prima*, Gradina on Jelica, *Naissus*, *Romuliana* and probably *Aquae*. Building and equipping church buildings indicated a great involvement of the local population and craftsmen. More luxuriously equipped churches demanded the presence of masters from different crafts and artistic centres, predominantly from the areas of Greece, Constantinople or *Asia Minor*.

Personal piety and assertion of belonging to the Christian community can best be traced through the funerary sphere. During the 4th century, under the influence of pagan traditions, there are numerous elements adapted to new understandings in the Christian funerary ritual: among them, the most commonly encountered is the placing of glass or ceramic vessels with holy water or ointment in graves, beside the deceased, which represents a continuation of the tradition of placing food and drink in pagan funerary rituals.

Changes in funerary customs are visible already since the 5th century, when burials in modest grave pits, without grave goods, became increasingly common, while members of the richer ranks were buried inside churches (*ad sanctos*) or in the porch, often in barrel-vaulted tombs, as the most luxurious grave form of that time (Jeremić 2014, 30–35; *Eadem* 2019, 121).

In the end of the 5th and during the 6th century, the Church enjoyed all the privileges in the Roman state. It is quite possible to trace the special, privileged position of the Church and its temples even in the remote parts of the Empire, as was the zone of the Limes in the area of the Iron Gates, where we encounter numerous examples of church building being erected in central or dominant zones within fortifications. The existence of a larger number of baptisteries, not only along the Limes (Jeremić, Ilić 2018, 211–219, fig. 9–17), but also in the hinterland of provinces, indicates the increased need for baptising the population, often of foreign and barbarian origin, among which there was a lot of barbarian soldiers for hire from the Roman army, but also local population, which survived there in difficult economic and social conditions, all the way until the collapse of the Limes and the Roman government in the beginning of the 7th century, when the areas of provinces were abandoned by the Romaian army, leaving the population to its uncertain fate under new masters. The functioning of Christian places of prayers during the 7th century, occasional traces of burials of the Romaian population according to Christian rituals, which remained in occupied territories, or mostly accidental finds of souvenirs from pilgrimage centres in *Asia Minor* or North Africa (*ampullae*, *unguentaria*) (Jeremić, Čerškov, 2021, 80–81, cat. no. 180), speak of the persistence of the Christian faith and of liturgies being conducted in times when being a Christian was dangerous for the believers and followers of this faith, similarly to the times when this religion was first being introduced into the area of Northern *Illyricum*.

Translated by Jelena Vitezović

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OD PROGONA DO DOMINACIJE: STVARANJE IDENTITETA RANIH HRIŠĆANA. ARHEOLOŠKO-ISTORIJSKA PERSPEKTIVA U SEVERNOM ILIRIKU

Apstrakt:

Arheološka svedočanstva o prisustvu i tragovima ranih hrišćana na prostoru Severnog Ilirika relativno su kasna u odnosu na obod mediteranskog basena, u kom je hristijanizacija započeta još od apostolskih vremena. Dvojica imperatora, Galerije i Konstantin I, ponikli na ovim prostorima, svojim ediktima u prvim decenijama IV veka, voljno ili ne, postavili su temelje slobodnog institucionalnog oblikovanja hrišćanske zajednice, koju su prepoznali kao rastuću

silu kasnoantičkog društva. Načini na koje se hrišćanska zajednica oblikovala i načini na koje je reagovala na složene socijalno-ekonomske uslove tokom svog formiranja, prate se na osnovu arheoloških tragova, registrovanih prvenstveno u većim urbanim centrima Severnog Ilirika. Sa opadanjem carske i upravne moći države, naročito tokom V i VI veka, koji su doveli do gubitaka teritorija i popuštanja pod pritiscima da se varvarska plemena nasele na rimskom tlu, uz uključivanje varvara u komandni vrh rimske vojske, došlo je do gubitka kontrole u upravljanju, a u kojima se hrišćanska Crkva pojavila kao posrednik i kao činilac koji okuplja sve pripadnike rimskog društva. U crkveno-državnoj sprezi obezbeđivana je stabilnost osetljivih zona carstva, a agresivna politika pokrštavanja i preuzimanje određenih administrativno-upravnih ingerencija samo su povećali moć Crkve u kasnoj antici i doveli do njene dominacije u rimskom društvu, čiju materijalizaciju pratimo kroz izgradnju i održavanje brojnih crkvenih građevina kako u gradskim, tako i u ruralnim sredinama.

Ključne reči: Severni Ilirik, hristijanizacija, martiri, edikti, episkopije, crkvene građevine, varvari, IV–VI/VII vek